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# LUTHER AS INTERPRETER: CHRIST AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

*John R. Wilch*

What method did Martin Luther employ for preaching Christ on the basis of the Old Testament? This question becomes significant when the following facts are considered: Although Luther made a tremendous impact on history and on church doctrine through his disputations and Reformational writings, he was by training and calling doctor and professor of the Holy Scriptures. It was with studying, lecturing upon and translating them that he was primarily occupied. Indeed, at least two-thirds of his lectures treated the Old Testament. Yet, Luther always preached Christ, even from the Old Testament, "in the conviction that through such exposition and preaching he was proclaiming the Gospel of the Reformation."<sup>1</sup> The question then arises: what hermeneutical method enabled Luther to teach and preach Christ from the Old Testament?

## LUTHER'S EXEGETICAL DEVELOPMENT

### Luther's Early Exegetical Method

Luther's interpretation of Scripture evidently underwent a gradual transformation. Let us examine the hermeneutical principles he employed in his first Biblical lectures at Wittenberg, the *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513-1515).

1. Luther made good use of the usual exegetical practice of the Middle Ages, the

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1. Volkmar Hertrich, "Luther und das Alte Testament," *Lutherjahrbuch* 20 (1938), p. 99.

*quadriga*, which assigned a fourfold sense to Scripture.<sup>2</sup> The first sense was the *sensus literalis*, the literal or historical sense.<sup>3</sup> (On how the early Luther understood this sense, see 3., below.) The second sense, *sensus allegoricus*, related the literal wording of the text to the Church or to its doctrine.<sup>4</sup> This sense was copiously employed by the young Luther. By his own later admission, he was an expert in allegorizing (*artifex in allegoriis*) and could only with the greatest difficulty bring himself to be restricted in this invigorating intellectual exercise.<sup>5</sup> The third sense, *sensus tropologicus*, traditionally offered the moral interpretation of a text. Luther, however, uniquely emphasized this as the *sensus ultimatius* of Scripture, for, tropologically understood, Christ signifies the Christians' faith. In his early lectures, it appears that Luther usually understood "faith" as conformity to Christ—the situation in which the history and fate of Christ are laid on the believer by God.<sup>6</sup> Thus, faith was the Christian's acceptance of God's will and subjection to it, by which God then enables him to fulfill His will and to both endure the sacrificial life of sharing Christ's suffering as well as to receive the benefits of imitating the life of Christ.<sup>7</sup> The fourth sense, *sensus anagogicus*, interpreted texts eschatologically in respect to the final Consummation.<sup>8</sup> This was used very sparingly by Luther.

2. Basic to Luther's hermeneutic was his adoption of the Christian virtue of humility over against Scripture as the Christian's highest authority.<sup>9</sup> He said, "Scripture is in the power of God," and, "He gives it to the humble".<sup>10</sup> The exegete must subject his reason and all senses to the testimony of Scripture, for it demands blind trust and unconditional surrender.<sup>11</sup> Thus, to "understand" Scripture is to "believe" it.<sup>12</sup> Now, this is not really a "sacrifice of the intellect" per se, but rather a necessary theological

2. E.g., in his "Preface to the Glosses," *Dictata super Psalterium*, WA 3:11, 369; 10:3-4, 312.

3. E.g., in his preface to the psalm texts for the *Dictata* WA 3:13, 562; LW 10:7, 11:41.

4. E.g., on Pss. 4:1 & 9:13, WA 3:46, 91; LW 10:52, 96.

5. See on Ps. 119:66, WA 4:388; LW 11:461; Fritz Hahn, "Luthers Auslegungsgrundsätze und ihre theologischen Voraussetzungen," *Zeitschrift fuer systematische Theologie* 12, pp. 165, 202; Ralph Doermann, "Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation," *Interpreting Luther's Legacy*, Fred W. Meuser & Stanley D. Schneider, eds. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), p. 16.

6. E.g., on Pss. 57:8; 69:26 & 77:1, WA 3:320, 437, 532; LW 10:265, 379-80; 11:12; see James S. Preus, "Old Testament *promissio* and Luther's New Hermeneutic," *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967): 146-7.

7. See, e.g., on Pss. 54:1 & 81:1, WA 3:302, 614-5; LW 10:250; 11:103-4; also WA 67/III:60-1; Lowell C. Green, *How Melancthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel: The Doctrine of Justification in the Reformation* (Fallbrook, Cal.: Verdict Publishing House, 1980), pp. 66, 73.

8. See, e.g., on Ps. 77:1, WA 3:532; LW 11:12; Doermann, p. 16.

9. See, e.g., on Ps. 68:35, WA 3:408; LW 10:348; cf. Hahn, p. 170; Raymond F. Surburg, "Luther and the Christology of the Old Testament," 1982 Reformation Lectures, Bethany Lutheran College and Theological Seminary, Mankato, Minn. (to be published in *The Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, 1983). § 22.

10. On Ps. 75:8, WA 3:515; LW 10:459.

11. E.g., on Pss. 78:23-25; 110:1 & 119:71, WA 3:598; 4:229, 341; LW 11:63, 362, 464-5; see Willem J. Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, tr. John Schmidt (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), pp. 229, 233.

12. Hahn, p. 168.

conclusion drawn from the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross—foolishness for man, but wisdom for God.<sup>13</sup>

3. The outstanding hermeneutical characteristic of Luther's early lectures was appropriated from the recently published commentary by the French humanist Faber Stapulensis (Jacques Lefevre d'Étaples), *Quincuplex Psalterium* (1509). Faber's most important exegetical principle held that the literal sense is that which corresponds to the intention of the Spirit speaking through the prophet (= psalmist). Thus, it is spiritual (*sensus spiritualis*) and prophetic (*sensus propheticus*).<sup>14</sup> The meaning of Scripture, then, is not determined by the literal wording but by the prophetic-spiritual content. It of course follows that "no one understands another in spiritual writings unless he savours and possesses the same spirit."<sup>15</sup> This means that each method of the *quadriga* is only justified by making Christ, the content of Scripture, present for the individual in judgment and grace. So Luther, although he applied the four senses in practice, rejected them in principle in favour of a thoroughgoing Christology.<sup>16</sup>

4. Through his study at Erfurt, Luther was influenced by Occamism, which placed a high premium on exegesis. William of Occam had declared that, in order to be saved, a Christian is not called upon to believe what is not contained in Scripture. Furthermore, in interpreting Scripture, faith is to be placed above reason. Luther early demonstrated, on the one hand, an aversion to philosophical terminology and a preference for the language of Scripture. On the other hand and more important, he accepted as a basic principle the primary authority of Scripture. He delighted in quoting the conciliarist Nicolo Tudeschi, "In matters touching the faith, the word of a simple private person is to be preferred to that of a pope, if that person is moved by sounder arguments from the Old Testament and the New Testament."<sup>17</sup>

5. Likewise following medieval predecessors, Luther stressed from the beginning a Christological interpretation of Scripture, as already indicated above in reference to the *sensus tropologicus*. He understood Christ Himself to be both the speaker and the subject-matter of the whole Psalter: Christ has not only "opened the mind of those who are His so that they might understand the Scriptures," but is Himself the true author of the Psalms.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the only true sense of the Psalter is the "*sensus Christi*", for Christ is the literal content and meaning of the texts.<sup>19</sup> Beyond this, Luther's unique emphasis on the *sensus tropologicus* was prompted by his conviction that the goal of interpretation is the personal appropriation of the Christological content of Scripture. In effect, the Bible is a dead letter unless it is applied by the believer

13. See on Ps. 92:1, WA 4:82-3; LW 11:231; Hahn, p. 170.

14. See on Pss. 77:20 & 119:1, WA 3:549; 4:305; LW 11:37, 414; Hahn, pp. 166-7; cf. Gerhard Ebeling, "Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutik," *Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche* 48 (1951); reprint: *Lutherstudien I* (Tobingen: Mohr, 1971), pp. 220-6.

15. WA 4:305; LW 11:414.

16. See on Ps. 77:1, WA 3:531; LW 11:12; Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, tr. Eric W. & Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 88-9; vs. Ebeling, pp. 175-6.

17. Quoted by Doermann, p. 16.

18. In the "Preface to the Glosses," WA 3:11; LW 10:3; see WA 3:46, 228, 330; LW 10:52, 188, 272; 11:38; Kooiman, pp. 31-2.

19. On Ps. 119:60, WA 4:379; LW 11:517; see Hahn, p. 200; Preus, pp. 146-7.



in his own life.<sup>20</sup> Here, Luther followed Augustine in adopting the first hermeneutical principle of Tyconius, a fourth-century Donatist, that Scripture often speaks of Christ and His Church, the Head and the Body, as one person. As medieval exegetes loved to put it, "As with the head, so with the body."<sup>21</sup> Thus, for the young Luther, the events of the life of Christ are signs of events in the lives of Christians; what happened to Christ also happens to His Church and to the faithful.<sup>22</sup>

6. In stressing the *sensus propheticus* and the *sensus Christi*, Luther in the *Dictata* rejected an historical exegesis, represented then mainly by the Jewish rabbis and the Franciscan Nicholas de Lyra. With their emphasis on the historical-literal sense of Scripture, they were, for Luther, blind to the spiritual meaning and therefore failed to see the relationship to Christ, who is the Centre of Scripture.<sup>23</sup>

7. Luther also adopted the traditional medieval method of typology, which worked hand-in-hand with the presupposition that the *sensus literalis* referred primarily to Christ Himself. Thus, the Old Testament persons, institutions and events in particular, although recognized as having been factually historical as such, were valued as significant for Christianity only as shadows, signs and types of corresponding persons, institutions and events of the New Testament and of the Church. In this sense, Christ, the New Testament and the Church were understood to have fulfilled the Old Testament.<sup>24</sup> The effect of this view was to limit the theological uniqueness of the Old Testament, for it only had theological relevance in its New Testament antitypes. The first appearance of spiritual salvation was marked by the Incarnation. The "hermeneutical divide" was between the two Testaments; any content the carnal Old Testament had, must be derived from the spiritual New Testament. This also means that any interest in understanding the Old Testament historically is suppressed for, ultimately, it is not the Old Testament that must be understood, but the New Testament.<sup>25</sup>

8. Possibly the most significant advice given by anyone to Luther was that of Johannes von Staupitz to direct his attention to the crucified Christ. This eventually led to the centrality of the Cross in his theology. Already in the *Dictata*, the *theologia crucis* made itself felt as Luther saw God revealing Himself through the crucified Christ. It is through the Cross that the meaninglessness of our life becomes mean-

20. See on Pss. 68:13; 71:19 & 74:6, WA 3:399, 458, 500; LW 10:355, 402, 442; Hahn, p. 201; Ebeling, pp. 228-30; James S. Preus, "Luther on Christ and the Old Testament," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (1972): 490-1.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 489-90.

22. See on Pss. 31:9 & 69:1-3, WA 3:168, 440; LW 10:139, 382; Kooiman, p. 31.

23. See on Pss. 78:45; 94:20 & 101:5, WA 3:587; 4:97-8, 137; LW 11:75, 250, 290; Hahn, pp. 171-3.

24. See on Pss. 74:1 & 77:19-20, WA 3:492-3, 546, 549; LW 10:431-2; 11:32, 37; Preus, "O.T. promissio," p. 148.

25. See WA 3:456-7; 55/1:92-4; James S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1969), pp. 156, 163-4.

ingful, that Christ as the "proper" work of God becomes the example of all works of God, and that Christians realize that their life is also one of cross-bearing.<sup>26</sup>

## Reasons for a Change in Luther's Method

1. Luther's peculiar stress from the start on the *sensus tropologicus* already indicates that he was inclined to be his own man, an independent thinker. Even as early as 1509, when he was lecturing on Peter Lombard's *Sententiae*, Luther was already dismissing arguments of prominent church theologians for lacking Scriptural support.<sup>27</sup> This courageous inclination harboured tremendous potential—if he could be convinced by a higher authority, which could only be the Holy Scriptures. This conviction was not long in bearing fruit.

It was evidently Luther's inclination to make Scripture relevant to contemporary Christians—his emphasis on the *sensus tropologicus*—that prepared him for a new hermeneutic. According to James S. Preus, the further Luther proceeded into the text of the Psalms in the course of the *Dictata*, the more he occupied himself with applying the text to the life of the Christian. The turning-point came when he realized that the faith of the Israelite psalmists per se must be taken seriously.<sup>28</sup> The traditional approach of allegory and typology was not doing justice to the psalmists.

Luther found himself occasionally empathizing with the believing psalmists and their situations. Instead of the text merely pointing directly to Christ as the proper author and speaker as an example for Christians, he sometimes saw it as a witness to the faith of the ancient Israelite believer. Instead of the psalm being only a prayer of Christ that Christians are likewise to pray "in Christ," it could now be seen as a believer's prayer, e.g., for the coming Messiah.<sup>29</sup>

Luther was beginning to allow the literal sense of the text to conform to the historical order: he paid attention to those who believed before the Incarnation of Christ. Instead of the psalmist's word simply being put prophetically into the mouth of Christ or of the Church, it could now be recognized as the psalmist's own word in his own situation. Instead of Christ being the point of departure for a prophetic, "spiritual" exegesis, He could become the goal of the exegesis. Instead of the tropological application being derived from the Christian's likeness to Christ, it could be derived from his likeness to the psalmist.<sup>30</sup>

This analogy was carried further by Luther by noting the similarity between the Old Testament believer under the Law and asking for Christ, and the Christian in sin (and therefore still under the Law) and asking for forgiveness. Luther could even now

26. E.g., on Ps. 72:1, WA 3:463; LW 10:405; see Hahn, pp. 174-6; cf. Ebeling, p. 216. It is even likely that the Cross is the source of the dialectical aspect of Luther's theology, i.e., of his principle of contradiction (see Hahn, p. 177).

27. Doermann, p. 16.

28. See, e.g., on Pss. 101 & 142, WA 4:141, 443; Preus, "O.T. promissio," p. 153; *ibid.*, *From Shadow*, pp. 172-4.

29. See, e.g., on Pss. 129 & 142, WA 4:418, 443; Preus, *ibid.*, p. 174; *ibid.*, "O.T. promissio," pp. 152-3.

30. See, e.g., on Pss. 88 & 142, WA 4:49-50, 443; Preus, *ibid.*, pp. 153-5; *ibid.*, *From Shadow*, pp. 212-5.

speak of the Old Testament people as "the faithful synagogue," awaiting and petitioning the advent of Christ. In fact, he is quick to identify them as "the faithful remnant." Therefore, the exegesis of the Old Testament per se may now become theologically important as well as historically credible. In fact, Luther's new hermeneutic of the Old Testament could make it possible for reuniting the "theological" and "grammatical" senses of the Old Testament; for the theological understanding of the text no longer required a figurative construction.<sup>31</sup>

2. J.S. Preus also sees Luther anchoring his new exegetical programme on the dual foundation of promise and advent: Christ's advents (in the flesh, in the believer's soul and eschatologically) come as the fulfilment of God's promises. Because certain Old Testament promises remained unfulfilled, their fulfilment must be found in the New Testament; otherwise, the faith of Israel would have been in vain.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the content of the Old Testament is determined by the New Testament. If the Old Testament indicates the way to life, this meant the way to eternal life. In fact, "if the Old Testament can be interpreted by human wisdom without the New, I should say that the New Testament has been given to no purpose."<sup>33</sup>

3. One result of this turn of affairs, according to Preus, is that Luther began to view faith differently. It is no longer accepting what the church taught about God (*credulitas*),<sup>34</sup> nor the willingness to be conformed to Christ in the *imitatio Christi*. Instead, it begins to take on the character of expectation, trust and hope in the Word of promise. For it is the character of "testimony" and "promise" to be theologically edifying in themselves, inviting faith by testifying to future goods. Thus faith is seen less and less as *assensus* (assent), and more and more as reliance on God to do what He promises, as *fiducia*. God's *testimonia* and *promissio*, i.e., the Gospel, is now seen as the normative meaning of all Scripture.<sup>35</sup>

Christ, who has the virtues of love, humility and obedience rather than those of faith and hope, is no longer for Luther the model for the Christian faith. The model is now the Old Testament "faithful remnant" in their struggle against desperation and in face of all the contradictions of their historical existence. The Church, like "the faithful synagogue," is no longer something that is already perfected, but that functions in the world as a testimony and promise of the future God will bring.<sup>36</sup>

4. Since a Christological emphasis had been the norm for an Old Testament hermeneutic throughout the Church's history, it was not until Luther adopted the promise-advent structure that, according to Preus, his view of Christ became

31. See, e.g., on Pss. 119, 129 & 142, WA 4:228, 305, 310, 346-7, 360, 418, 443; Preus, *ibid.*, pp. 180-3, 216-20; *ibid.*, "O.T. *promissio*," pp. 153-5.

32. See, e.g., on Ps. 113:1, WA 4:261-2; also WA 3:368, 375; 4:408; 55/I:6; TR/I:136; Preus, *ibid.*, pp. 157-9; *ibid.*, *From Shadow*, pp. 174-5; Green, pp. 97-8.

33. On Ps. 16:10, WA 3:13; LW 10:6; see WA 5:443-4; Fritz Hahn, "Zur Verchristlichung der Psalmen durch Luthers Uebersetzung," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* (1934-1935), pp. 174-6; Surburg, § 116.

34. Green, pp. 95, 101.

35. See, e.g., on Pss. 68:14; 119:31, 129, 168, WA 3:412; 4:298, 320, 389-90, also 4:310, 322; Preus, *From Shadow*, pp. 183, 187-8; Green, p. 72.

36. See, e.g., on Pss. 119:24; 121:2, 4, WA 4:320, 399-400, 402-3; Preus, *ibid.*, pp. 220-5, 231-7; *ibid.*, "O.T. *promissio*," p. 160.



unique.<sup>37</sup> In other words, it was a change in Luther's Old Testament hermeneutic that appeared to help lead him to the evangelical understanding of Christ, as well as of the Gospel, faith and justification.

5. J.S. Preus leaves the impression that Luther exchanged a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament for an historical one. However, this was not the case. As Fritz Hahn indicated already in 1934, first, Luther's Christology had always been Cross-oriented (see A.8., above), and therefore inclined toward the doctrine of justification by faith. Secondly, rather than diminishing in force, it was his Christology that determined how Luther made use of the emphasis on grammar and history. He came to reject the *quadriga*, esp. allegory, emphasizing the literal-grammatical-historical sense—the "simple sense of Scripture"; he gave due consideration to the historical situation; he attacked the interpretations of the church fathers; he preferred the Hebrew text to the Vulgate and Septuagint (in the Hebrew, one hears God speaking).<sup>38</sup> However, he continued to find abundant evidence in the Old Testament for the presence of Christ and of the doctrines about Christ. As in the *Dictata*, the essential matter (*res*)—the crucified Christ and justification through Him—remained more important than the wording of the text (*verba*).<sup>39</sup> This is why, in his translation of the Old Testament into German, he frequently took the liberty to render the text in a Christianized way. He himself commented that one could find more in his translation "than in all the commentaries."<sup>40</sup> Thus, Luther's Christology of the Old Testament was not replaced by an historical hermeneutic. Instead, it was now primarily aided by an historical-literal reading of the text instead of mainly by a spiritual understanding, assisted by allegory and typology.

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37. *From Shadow*, pp. 181-2.

38. See on Ps. 1:1, 6, WA 5:27, 56; LW 14:287, 324-5; also WA 40/II:474; 42:173; Hahn, "Luthers," pp. 207-12; *ibid.*, "Zur Verchristlichung," p. 186.

39. See WA 42:597; Hahn, *ibid.*, p. 203; *ibid.*, "Luthers," pp. 213-4; refer to Green's thorough treatment, pp. 61-105.

40. See WA TR:5, No. 5324; LW 54:408; Hahn, *ibid.*, pp. 217-8; refer to Hahn, "Zur Verchristlichung," *passim*; Bornkamm, pp. 219-46; Karl Brinkel, *Luthers Hermeneutik in seiner Uebersetzung des Alten Testaments und die gegenwärtige Revision der Lutherbibel*, *Luthertum* 24, (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1960) pp. 12-37.